A SHERIFF'S TALE
BADGERMAO ZINE

Foreword

Thank you for purchasing A Sheriff's Tale, a fanmade zine dedicated to the relationship of Mao Mao and Badgerclops from Cartoon Network's Mao Mao: Heroes of Pure Heart!

This project will donate all profits to the Marsha P. Johnson Institute, an organization to help black trans folks in need.

I am very proud of all contributors who have taken part of this project, this wouldn't be possible without them. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your hard work. This zine doesn't have a specific theme, but shows both platonic and romantic themes involving two of the main characters of the series.

Mao Mao and Badgerclops' relationship, both canon and fanon, are very special to me personally. They're one of my favorite things about the show, and I'm so happy I was able to team up with such amazing people to create a zine about them. I hope you all love it as much as I do.

Much love to you all, from MaoMaosMother

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fight the cook

A Little Bit Soft

The first time they meet, Mao Mao saves him. The weight of the rocks toppled atop Badgerclops' foot is staggering, and it's the fear of being left alone (abandoned, as he wouldrefuse to admit for quite some time) with a weaponized stranger aiming a sword his way that keeps him from instinctively freeing himself from his predicament. As fact was, he could have easily gotten out on his own; he was considered the *muscle* of the Thicket Thieves for a reason. His cybernetic arm could lift only a little less than his own body weight, so one at a time, he could have pushed the rocks from his trapped foot until he was released.

But, with a sword to his face, that wasn't where his mind was.

His mind went to *I'm gonna die I'm gonna die I'm gonna get hacky slashed by a CAT!*

He's not quite sure what he yells in plea for his life, but the sword does not meet his soft, badgery flesh, nor even the cold metal attachments to it. Instead, it strikes between the rocks, dislodging them until they topple off of him on their own in one swift movement. Then it's just Badgerclops and the cat, holding out a gloved paw to help him up.

And his mind goes to *I'm gonna have a new best friend.*

"Here," says the cat, the stranger, the nicest person Badgerclops has ever met. His eyes are hard, his voice rough, and everything about his mannerisms screams 'sharp'- both his mind and his sword. Mao Mao, as he'd introduced himself as (and Badgerclops had been forced to make an effort *not* to laugh about), gestures to Hippet Hale. The small town below the cliff atop which they stand glows bright and carelessly as the sun sets behind them. "There will probably be someone who can take a look at your foot down there."

Alarm bells ring in the badger's head. "Wha- you're leaving me?"

The cat blinks, surprised. "Uhhh, *no*. You're a criminal. I'm not gonna just unleash you on some poor, undeserving town. No, we're going down there together to get that," he gestures to the leg that had been pinned under the rocks, of which Badgerclops had been limping to avoid stepping on as much as he could, "medical attention. Then you're gonna help me hunt down the rest of your little robber crew so justice can be swiftly served."

Badgerclops' eye widens. The Thicket Thieves had been scattered as soon as Mao Mao raised his sword- there's no telling where they were now. Besides...

"Why aren't you locking me up?" he asks, unsure if he even wants an answer. "I... Look, it's not like I *wanted* to be a criminal, but I ended up one. Shouldn't I be 'locked up' alongside the rest of the Thicket Thieves? Because yes, those guys are criminals too, but I'm sure they have their own reasons for it... you know, besides a general sense of greed and a lust for making people cower in fear as they turn over their personable possessions," he rambles, then redirects his focus; "but just because they're a bad influence on me doesn't mean I shouldn't be held accountable the same way they will be. Right?"

Mao Mao waits for him to finish, looking him over to ensure he's done speaking- huffing, really before butting in again. "The law has to be upheld. I believe that with my entire life. You broke it, and you will be punished for that, just... not behind bars. What I'm offering is a compromise."

"A compromise?"

"Yes. You help me catch your 'bad influences', and I'll consider your crimes appealed. Instead of sending you to jail, you'll come with me. I hunt down bad guys, and your assistance will be community service.
Sound good?"

Badgerclops can't believe what he's hearing. It takes him a moment of processing before he can even undrop his jaw. "Wait, wait wait. So, you... want me to come with you... to catch more bad guys. And you won't send me to jail if I do?"

Mao Mao nods, then shakes his head. Badgerclops raises an eyebrow, and he frowns. "Look,

I won't send you to jail either way. Like I said, I- I believe you. It's a hero's instinct, and it's never wrong. But if you're truly not a bad person, you should consider helping people instead of hurting people. I'm giving you a way to do that."

The cyborg badger looks back down to the small town. It seems so much bigger once you're in it than it does from a distance, doesn't it? The cat watches him, eyes slit, waiting for his answer. It takes a few moments to come as Badgerclops bites his lip, thinking.

He's a criminal. He knows he's not a bad person, but honestly, he isn't sure how to be a good person. Everyone he's ever been around has defined 'good' differently, both in morality and what was 'good' for him. He didn't know what it truly looked like.

But Mao Mao was giving him a chance, despite who he'd seen him be.

And that was good enough for him.

Badgerclops extends a paw. With a dangerous (warm, he'd call it later) smile, Mao Mao gives it a shake.

And, with that, their fates are set.

Time passes, and the two travel on.

Mao Mao wants to be a hero. He wants to be a great one, the most legendary hero to exist. He wants to be more than his father says he is or his sisters make him feel. He wants to be *good*.

Badgerclops wants to be good enough for him. Or, that's how it starts.

Eventually, the more they travel- the more monsters they face, arrests they make (as vigilantes, but Mao Mao finds ways to deputize himself more than once), and dangerous roads they walk he starts to want to see Mao Mao succeed. He'd wanted that from the moment they met, really, but he knows he doesn't have to travel with Mao Mao just to prove to himself that he is, in fact, a good person. Once he learns that, he's free to leave, but he doesn't; he wants to see Mao Mao be great.

Personally, he thinks Mao Mao already *is* great. The guy goes out of his way to do the right thing every given moment, and the badger can't ascertain how he does it with such conviction. There's a passion there, a fire behind each swing of his sword, that amounts to more than a drive to act. It's enough for Badgerclops to choose to stay by his side, even after he's given out after out. It's enough to make him want to be there for his friend.

But Mao Mao doesn't see himself as enough, not to anybody.

And that's the thing- Badgerclops doesn't find himself staying because the cat is skilled with a sword. That's true sometimes, but others, it's the way he smiles after a win, or his horrible jokes made in passing. It's the way he grumbles when Badgerclops manages to walk ahead of him, and the way he hops up to reach something his small frame can't quite make it to, then yells at his friend to give him a boost rather than simply asking Badgerclops grab it for him. It's, sometimes especially, the way his eyes hold a fire that doesn't just destroy his enemies, but also keeps his friend warm.

Badgerclops sticks around, and watches Mao Mao train and fight and win. He doesn't plan on leaving, either.

When Badgerclops was a kid, he was hushed out of creativity. He was shoved into advanced schooling for his quick thinking and mechanical ingenuity, and he was at the top of everything he did.

When Badgerclops was a kid, he was everything Mao Mao wanted to be. Adored. Providing. Legendary.

Badgerclops tells him the truth- that when he was young, he was Mao Mao's destination. And he hated it so, so much.

"I ran away, dude," he forces out, wanting nothing more than to keep it buried deep down. He wanted to never confront it again, but the more Mao Mao pushed himself to try hard, then try *harder*- no, he needed to tell him. Mao Mao needed to know. "Being at the top… it takes away your freedom. It takes away who you are. You're just an idol, a- a star, beloved and bright," he makes a grand gesture to illustrate this point, to which the cat rolls his eyes at. "But you'll fall from that sky someday, man."

"Cool, then people can make a wish when they see me."

"No- ahhh, Mao Mao, they'll point and *laugh* at the kid who finally cracked. I don't… look, man, I'm gonna support you no matter what you want to do. You're my best friend, you know that, but I also don't

wanna see you get hurt like you did today if you keep trying to *push* your way to the top instead of climb."

The cat rolls his eyes. "Badgerclops, I'm-"

"You broke your left leg and cracked two ribs and you're lucky your fur is black because it hides that black eye you've got but I saw you get hit, bro, and I can see you squinting."

Mao Mao blows a raspberry. After a moment of Badgerclops glaring daggers at him, he sighs, and it seems to pain his ribs- he sucks in a sharp breath again, then lets it out much more carefully. "So I jumped the gun a little today. It shows exactly why I need to be better. I... can't be a legendary Hero if I fail like this," he admits, whispering the end, looking anywhere but at the cyborg.

The air is tense, and Badgerclops sighs for them both. Mao Mao was pushing his way to the top where Badgerclops had been pushed- and he'd fallen off.

Mao Mao was stubborn, and he wouldn't give this up. And Badgerclops would never ask him to.

But he would do one thing.

He'd be there to catch him if he falls.

Years go by, and they're still travelling together.

Mao Mao fights, Badgerclops by his side, and together- they win. And when they fail, they pick up and learn and fight again, and win once more.

"You know," Mao Mao says, one day, after a long battle, one that was a loss before it was anything Mao Mao could find honour in, "... your eye used to be blue."

Badgerclops had noticed. He's not sure when that happened, or why it's taken so long for it to be acknowledged. "Ya man."

Mao Mao keeps going, though. "You used to have an accent, too. I guess you still do, technically, but it's different now."

Was it? He's not sure if he'd noticed that, actually. "Oh ya?"

His companion nods. He's busying himself with cleaning off his sword as he speaks, but his eyes are flittering between the two. "Uh-huh."

When nothing else follows, the cyborg raises an eyebrow. "And you're mentioning this because..."

Mao Mao looks back to the sword. This time, he doesn't look back up, even as he shrugs. "Oh, I don't know. I just... I've noticed."

The sword is very clean at this point, but Mao Mao continues to wipe away. Badgerclops isn't sure what to do with his own paws, even as he asks, "Is that... okay?"

The cat does look up at that, eyes soft. "Badgerclops. I like who you were when I met you, and I like who you are now."

Badgerclops smiles. "Oh."

Mao Mao looks back to his sword, paws stilled. "A lot."

Badgerclops' smile flickers, surprised. "*Oh*."

No more words come as Mao Mao continues to clean Geraldine. Badgerclops hovers, for a long moment, at a loss for words.

Finally, he sits, their knees touching. He gently cups Mao Mao's paws, stopping the repetitive movement of the wiping. He takes the cloth away, and softly nudges Geraldine out of Mao Mao's paws so that he can hold them instead.

And he squeezes. And Mao Mao squeezes back.

"Ditto," Badgerclops says softly, every ounce of meaning pressed into a single word. Mao Mao shoves him off, yelling about personal space, face completely flushed. Badgerclops, in a similar state, yells back, and it's exactly as they'd have each other.

Loud, angry, sharp- but just a little bit soft.

Years go by, and Badgerclops wouldn't have it any other way.

Dancing in the Dark

The sunlight of the morning sky had shined brightly upon Mao Mao's face. It wasn't such a pleasant greeting, however, since Mao Mao awoke with a blaring light being flashed into his green eyes.

"Ouch, that hurts!" Mao Mao complained. The sunlight was enough to get Mao Mao out of bed. On the two lower bunks slept Adorabat, a young blue bat who, despite being very gentle, can be rather chaotic, which made others intimidated by her. The black feline considered her a good friend and an outstanding teammate. Over the past few months, he's gotten to know more about Adorabat.

On the lowest bunk slept Badgerclops, Mao's Mao life partner. Mao Mao never would have thought he would end up in a relationship with a cybernetic badger, yet here he was. He remembered the first time they met. Badgerclops was abandoned by his team, the Thicket Thieves, and within a mountain set on fire had he been rescued by a feline that he hugged close to himself afterwards. Years onward, Mao Mao and Badgerclops developed a friendship, evolving into something romantic. Mao Mao felt heartwarmed about it.

On most mornings, Mao Mao would loudly wake up his comrades to get ready for the day. For some reason he decided not to do so; he wasn't sure why, but he didn't question it. Grabbing some cobbler, the cat walked outside, eating his breakfast. Looking into the distance, he noticed wooden poles topped with colorful flags being lifted in the air. Curious, he finished his cobbler quickly and went to investigate.

He spotted several Sweetypies carrying things into an open space. Decorations, confetti and streamers were being thrown around. Balloons were being tied up onto objects, making sure they wouldn't float away. Some Sweetypies were attempting to lift a banner covered by bold letters, reading "7TH ANNUAL SWEETYPIE FESTIVAL: ATTEND FOR REFRESHMENTS AND ENLITENMENT." The word 'enlightenment' was spelled wrong because there wasn't any space left.

Mao Mao realized that this was a festival, a topic he and the King once discussed during a small conversation between the two. Although he forgot, the Sweetypies were barely beginning to set up, fortunately for him. He waited a month for this event, so he needed to alert the others, especially since he planned to have a special dance with Badgerclops during the festival. The cat quickly ran home.

"Guys, wake u-" An excited Mao Mao began to yell as soon as he entered his home. He stopped himself from continuing, since he noticed that Badgerclops and Adorabat were already awake, sitting down in the living room.

"Oh, you guys are awake?"

"Uhh, we've been awake, dude," Badgerclops responded. The badger was munching on a bag of chips as he said this, which was casual for him to do. "Where've you been?"

Adorabat flew towards the cat energetically. "Hi Mao Mao!" the blue bat greeted him with a smile. "I'm drawing more family pictures to put on the wall. I hope you like them!" She pointed at the paper and crayons on the floor.

"That's very sweet, Adorabat." Mao Mao told her.

She flew onto the cat's head.

"Listen you guys, the Sweetypies are setting up a festival right now and we need to go help! It's gonna be a big festival, I'm telling you!"

"Wow, really?!" Adorabat screamed. "I wanna see!" She flew fast outside the door and into the valley. Mao Mao just watched, surprised that she flew that fast.

"Dude, it's only the morning though," Badgerclops whined. "I'm eating my breakfast."

"You call a bag of chips breakfast?" the cat asked.

"At least I'm eating something," the badger frowned.

"Don't be upset, I was just meaning to inform you," Mao Mao spoke slowly. "It's just that this festival is going to be as huge as all the monsters we fight!"

"Is it really going to be that big?"

"I'm... not so sure," Mao Mao told him. "It's gonna be huge for me, though. Uh, something

special is, er, gonna happen, and I wanted you to be there to see." Mao Mao gently grasped both of the badger's hands.

"Ooh, a surprise?"

"Uh, yes! It is a surprise, and if you want to see what it's gonna be, then let's get going, shall we?"

Badgerclops poured the remaining chips into his mouth. "Alrighty then."

The duo hopped onto their aerocycle and flew towards Pure Heart Valley. Stopping by the area where the festival was taking place, Mao Mao ran to the King, who was sitting down on his chair.

"Your majesty, I apologize for arriving late to preparations," Mao Mao bowed to the flamboyant lion.

"Geez, so extra," Badgerclops snickered.

"Quiet!"

"Morning, sheriff," the King greeted. "So glad you could attend the festival this early."

"So, we're *not* late?"

"Of course not, you silly feline!" the King proceeded to chuckle. "The Sweetypies are setting up as I watch them go. Surely you can help them out a little, haha."

"I will do so right away, your majesty," the cat bowed again.

"Toodaloo!" the King waved.

"Alright, c'mon Badgerclops, we gotta set these things just right so the festival can look perfect for tonight!" Mao Mao laughed.

"How long is this gonna take, dude?"

"It won't be long if we set up quickly," Mao Mao answered. "Now see if you can find Adorabat anywhere, I want her to help too."

"I'll keep an eye out."

Mao Mao aided the Sweetypies, helping them set up circular tables and chairs. He didn't help with decor, since the Sweetypies handled it well. But alongside Badgerclops, the duo were able to cook food and bake delicious pastries. Hydra eggs, cobbler, main courses, snacks and drinks were found laid out across a narrow table, and their luxurious smell was completely divine.

In the corner of his eye, Mao Mao spotted Adorabat hanging decorations along the strings in the air. He was glad to have found her helping out the sweetypies, but was rather surprised that Badgerclops hadn't even spotted her yet, getting distracted by the snacks lying on the table. Amused, Mao Mao decided to keep quiet, wanting to tell him once the badger finally spotted the bat, laughing the longer it took the badger to find her.

"Hey Mao Mao, I finally found Adorabat!"

"Yeah I knew where she was," Mao Mao interrupted. "She was here the entire time trying to help. What took you so long?"

"Uhh, nothing," Badgerclops burped. "Was just having trouble looking for her, is all."

"Pfft."

Work passed by quickly despite taking hours for the preparations to be completed. The sunset indicated this, and although that seemed bad, the timing was rather right. These annual festivals usually commenced once nightfall struck. Only, unlike other festivals, the current one was actually finished setting up for once. Mao Mao felt much excitement as the King proceeded to make his announcement.

"Sweetypies of Pure Heart Valley!" the King exclaimed. "I am proud to announce that after all the hard work I've done to set up this exquisite festival for you..."

"He didn't do the work!" Badgerclops muttered.

"I know, but shush, he's talking..." Mao Mao responded.

"Pfft. Fine."

"...I am hereby commencing our annual festival! You may all dance away..." The King proceeded to laugh as everyone got together to dance. Mao Mao did his best to conceal his excitement as he made his way towards the badger beside him. He cautiously tiptoed towards his lover, making sure nobody else spotted him going towards him; he preferred keeping his relationship private. However, many sweetypies kept dancing closely around the sheriff, and with these many eyes, someone was bound to have caught him dancing with Badgerclops.

Fortunately for the shy sheriff, the lights proceeded to get faulty. Everybody groaned as the lights completely died out.

"I thought the bulbs were working now!" the King cried. "WILLIAM!!!"

His servant came right away at the loud mention of his name.

"Take me away! I no longer wish to be here."

The servant carried the King's chair towards the castle. Lacking lighting, the Sweetypies attempted their best to continue celebrating, dancing in the dark. Mao Mao saw this as an opportunity to have a dance with Badgerclops away from the crowd. The feline grabbed his friend's robotic arm and pulled him away from the festival.

"Yo, where are we going?" Badgerclops asked with high volume. "The festival's that way, my dude."

"I just wanted to get away from the crowd was all."

"Why?"

"I wanted to dance with you here is why," Mao Mao began to explain. "But I don't want anyone else to see. I just want this moment to be between you and me."

"Aww, what a gentleman," the badger blushed.

"So, can I have this dance?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

Mao Mao was confused by Badgerclops' statement, but immediately realized what he said wrong. "*May* I have this dance?"

"You may."

"Pfft."

The two laughed at the badger's silly joke as they spun each other around. The movements of their dance was absolutely perfect. Their motions developed a rhythm to the music within the background. Mao Mao could see amazement on Badgerclops' face, which made him smile widely since he was glad to see his boyfriend happy.

"You dance so well," Badgerclops told the cat with an impressed tone.

Mao Mao was flattered. "Thank you, I've been practicing this for a month."

"Aww, did you practice just for me?"

"I sure did, bud. I sure did."

The badger nuzzled the cat's nose, and Mao Mao returned the gesture. They proceeded to do the tango together, dancing farther away from the festival. Mao Mao didn't mind that, since no one would be able to see him for sure. Badgerclops felt the same, since he knew how much their little secret meant to his boyfriend. Their tango started off at a fast pace but proceeded to slow down with each step taken. Mao Mao and Badgerclops examined each other's faces, staring deeply into the other's open eyes. They could gaze at each other forever, and never even think once of turning away from the facial expressions they considered to be the definition of beauty.

"Thank you for all of this, Mao Mao," Badgerclops broke the silence. "I really appreciate this."

"I appreciate you, Badgerclops."

"D'aww," Badgerclops started to tear up. "I love you, dude! I love you so much."

"Likewise, Badgerclops," Mao Mao responded. "I love you too. I hope you and I can dance again like this another day."

"Of course we can, sweetie. Whenever you and I are ready, we'll dance again. Preferably in the dark, since this is rather nice."

"Can't wait for next time, hehe."

"I can't wait either, bud."

The music had faded entirely as Mao Mao and Badgerclops closed in onto each other's faces. This moment together would prove to be an excellent conclusion to the dance the both of them pursued pas-sionately. Closing their eyes, the two shared a deep kiss together the way they did sometimes.This one was highly special, since their kiss together had derived from a unique sequence the two got to experience, and it all went according to Mao Mao's plan. To them, this day will be eternally remarked as the time Mao Mao and Badgerclops were dancing in the dark, infatuated by their love for each other.

Maonniversary

Almost another year behind us. Where does the time go?

The thought occurred to Mao Mao as he and Badgerclops rode the aerocycle back to HQ. Just a few days from now would be a few years out from that day in the tent, where he and his partner had given voice to those strange new feelings cropping up inside of them. They'd been messy and inexperienced back then, neither of them having been in a relationship before. Even back then, though, they'd both known they'd needed to say something.

It was difficult, and more than a little awkward, but they'd managed. Two outcasts that'd been sitting in a makeshift camp had found a place where they didn't feel quite so strange,weak, or unappreciated. Not even a place, really. It was just each other. That fact still put a warm feeling in Mao Mao, even after all this time.

"Hey, whatcha thinkin' about?"

Badgerclops' voice from behind him reminded Mao Mao that he'd been quiet for the entire duration of their ride back home. Considering what a rare occasion that was, it was no wonder that his partner was looking to find out just what was going on in his head.

"Just the future," he responded, carefully running his thumb over the aerocycle's right handle. "Thinking about the big day coming up."

"Oh heck yeah, burrito night is Wednesday! I remember because you promised it to me, and if you go back on that promise, I *will* cry!"

Mao Mao would've pinched the bridge of his nose, if doing so weren't such a breach of safety precautions at the moment. "First of all, I'm an honorable hero and never go back on my word. Secondly, think of a bigger day."

"I literally don't know what could possibly be bigger than burritos, but okay."

Again, Mao Mao had to make a conscious effort to keep his irritation in check. He knew full well that Badgerclops remembered the date of their anniversary just as well as he himself did. He was either playing dumb, or just hungry and really fixating on burritos. Either way, it didn't make sense to keep pushing the issue. It was probably best to drop it for now.

"Forget it," the cat said with a sigh, "let's just get back home and make sure that Adorabat didn't try to get into your power tools again."

"Heh, yeah. I should lock those things up or something. She almost lost an eye last time!" Badgerclops gave a little chuckle at the memory. "It's a good thing she didn't, because having one eye is just supposed to be my thing and I really don't wanna have to share that with anyone, y'know?"

"I'm ignoring that last bit. Anyway, did you ever ask why she wanted to stay behind? Usually she's so eager to go to the store with us."

"Beats me," Badgerclops responded, shrugging his shoulders. "She said something about having plans

with Chubbum and some nasty bugs."

That sounded far from promising. That was enough to give Mao Mao a hunch that some inevitable hijinx were afoot. It was probably best to speak to her as soon as they got back, just to quell any antics that were brewing. He was in no mood for antics, especially not ones that involved Chubbum.

As it turned out, Mao Mao didn't need to go looking for Adorabat to find out what sort of antics she was up to. They were already in motion when they arrived back at headquarters.

From the moment he and Badgerclops climbed up from the garage into the main building, it was clear something was off. The entire place was dark, with the only light being a soft, flickering coming from the doorway into the kitchen.

Oh, yes, Mao Mao thought to himself, *there are most certainly shenanigans occurring in this place.*

"The lights were on when we left, weren't they?" he asked Badgerclops, his voice a hushed whisper.

"Uhh...maybe?"

Mao Mao gave a frustrated little growl as he looked around the immediate area, scanning it for anything amiss. "Oh for the love of — they *were* on! That means either Adorabat is up to something, or there's somebody else here!"

Finally, it seemed to sink in. Badgerclops' eye opened in realization as he gave a soft "*Ohhhh*," in response. "D'you think she's practicing trap building again? That rope net thing she caught me in last month was seriously messed up, man!"

"Shh! It's quite possible," Mao Mao hissed, unsheathing his sword and beginning to creep towards the kitchen. "Come on, be on your guard."

He could hear the sound of an arm cannon warming up from behind him. "Yeah, sure, whatever."

The two approached the doorway silently, flanking it from both sides. They shared a look and a nod before leaping into action. Both of them burst forth into the room, brandishing their respective weapons as they took in the scene before them.

"Sheriff's department!" Mao Mao cried, Geraldine pointed in the direction of the table. "Identify yourself at once, before we—!"

His shouting trailed off as soon as it had begun, though. Instead of an ambush from any sort of legitimate threat, they were faced with none other than Chubbum standing on their table. He smiled at them, a dilapidated old violin held in one of his hands. The other gave the pair a wave, seeming entirely unaware of just what an oddity it was for him to be standing in their kitchen.

"Ugh, it's only Chubbum," Mao Mao snorted derisively, returning Geraldine to her sheathe.

Badgerclops was comparatively less relaxed about that revelation. "Yeah, that's so messed up!" His left hand remained on the base of his arm cannon, keeping his aim trained on the Sweetypie. "Just gimme the word, Mao! I've got the shot!"

"Yeah, no, that's enough of that." Mao Mao reached over, lowering Badgerclops' arm with one hand before turning his attention back to Chubbum. "Alright you little intruder, give me one good reason that I shouldn't write you up for forced entry into a private residence."

The frog blinked a bit in response, looking between Mao Mao and Badgerclops with an unassuming smile. "Is this my cue? Do I start with the slow songs? The energetic ones? Adorabat said to go when the moment was right!"

"Okay, Adorabat isn't even *here* right now!" Badgerclops said, sounding supremely irritated as he finally deactivated his arm cannon and returned it to its default form. "So don't you dare try to implicate her in whatever sort of weird—"

"Surprise!"

Adorabat suddenly flew in behind them with a cry so shrill that Badgerclops shrieked as well, hopping up in fear and landing in Mao Mao's arms. Mao Mao would've been more surprised himself, if not for his superior detective skills and infinite perception that allowed him to foresee something like this happening. He caught Badgerclops without complaint, only groaning slightly as he turned to his young protégée.

"Adorabat, explain what's going on," he commanded, eyes narrowed as he gently lowered his boyfriend to the floor.

"It's a surprise! For you two!" Adorabat's excited grin didn't fade as she flew past the two, perching down on the table beside Chubbum. "Just look! I made a super special night for you two because I wanted your anniversary to be special!"

She spread her wings out wide to either side of her, gesturing to the work she'd done while the other two were away. True to her word, there was a lot done that Mao Mao hadn't even noticed when he and Badgerclops had first come in.

The hazy, flickering lighting was the result of a beat-up looking silver candelabra with threecandles in it sitting on the center of the table. There was a pair of plates, one sitting on each side of the table. Both were covered with insects, all manner of cockroaches and beetles crawling around on the white porcelain.

"It's a candlelit dinner for two!" Adorabat elaborated, her eyes twinkling. "I found all the yummiest looking bugs I could find, I took this pretty candle hand thing from the dump, and Chubbum is here to serenade you with accompaniment from his violin!"

"I was knighted by King Snugglemagne for my contribution to the arts!" Chubbum added, just as excited as his co-conspirator in this little plot.

"Dude, I think I'm gonna be sick," Badgerclops whispered to his boyfriend, grimacing as he watched one fat little roach fall from a plate onto the table.

Mao Mao was similarly disenchanted. "Adorabat, how did you even know about the anniversary?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he stepped up to the little bat on the table. "We've never mentioned the date to you!"

"Oh, that part was easy!" Adorabat exclaimed. "I just read in your diary about how you've been thinking about it for the past few weeks!"

Mao Mao blanched a bit in response. "Wait, you read my — THOSE ARE MY

PRIVATE THOUGHTS!"

"Aww, man, you've been thinking about it for weeks?" Badgerclops swooned from behind him.

Mao Mao spun on his heel, turning towards his boyfriend with a glare and a snarl. "YES I HAVE BEEN, BECAUSE I CHERISH YOU AND OUR RELATIONSHIP!"

That notion seemed to delight Badgerclops, who giggled impishly and blushed. He turned away and shook his head, apparently thrilled beyond words. It was adorable, but Mao Mao was dealing with a bigger problem right now. There was still the issue of explaining to Adorabat that this wasn't how they were going to be celebrating their anniversary. It needed to be handled deftly, though.

He took a deep breath to calm himself before anything else, squeezing his eyes shut and inhaling through his nose. Soothing thoughts were forced through his mind as he held the breath for a few moments before giving a big, exaggerated exhale through his mouth. Perfect. Now he was in the right headspace to deliver this crushing news.

"Adorabat," he began carefully, "this is a lovely looking evening, but we *are not* doing this."

Predictably, Adorabat's beaming face fell instantly. "But...wha?"

"Yeah, no offense or anything, but we've had the same plans for years," Badgerclops explained, walking up beside Mao Mao. "It's like, a tradition. We've always done it, and we're just gonna keep doing it because change is scary."

Not the most delicate way of putting it, but that was a satisfactory summary. Mao Mao gave a little nod and a smile to his partner, reaching over to take his hand in his.

"So what is it you two do, then?" Adorabat asked.

"Well, back when we first got together, we didn't have much," Mao Mao began to explain.

"Pfft, we didn't have anything but a lame tent!" Badgerclops replied with a snort. "I wanted diamonds, but he couldn't even afford rhinestones."

Mao Mao shook his head fondly. "We had to make do with what he had. Instead of any big gifts or outings, we would just keep it simple. We'd wait for a clear night, step out of the tent, and just...watch the stars together."

With that explanation, Adorabat's face fell even further. She suddenly looked quite crestfallen. "Oh, gee. Now all this just feels a lil silly, huh?"

"Yeah, it's all kind of—" Badgerclops' words were cut off by a grunt as Mao Mao discreetly jabbed an elbow into his side.

"You put together a wonderful looking night," the cat said, reaching up to pat Adorabat's head. "Maybe just...for a different couple. *Right*, Badgerclops?"

"Ugh, yeah, sure." Badgerclops rubbed the spot where he'd been struck, pouting to himself. "Some couple who likes bugs woulda loved it."

"Exactly. Now then, let's get this cleaned up. Maybe you can still bring the candelabra with us when we go out to find a good stargazing spot."

Adorabat perked up again at that. “Wait, does that mean…?”

“Oh yes, of course you're coming with us,” Mao Mao assured her with a grin. “You're one of us now, after all.”

Adorabat's wide, starry eyes shone even brighter. Even if he'd never admit it, Mao Mao's heart did a little flip at the sight.

“Oh, oh, hey, am I invited too?” Chubbum suddenly piped up, eagerly hopping from one foot to another.

The trio shared a look, each of them having forgotten he was even there.

Badgerclops was the first to break the awkward silence that followed. “Uh, no, definitely not. You have to leave now,” he answered. “Like, right now.”

“Aww.” The Sweetypie sulked, but did as he was told without putting up a fight. He hopped off the table and sulked off towards the front door.

“...Right then,” Mao Mao spoke after a brief, but still immensely awkward, silence. “Steel yourselves, everyone. We've got some bugs to take care of..”

It was less of a romantic plan than sitting under the stars with his lover, but he was alright with that. Doing a little impromptu termination with a family was just as good, even if it was in a different way. There were no other two people that Mao Mao would rather be eradicating these tiny foes with, after all.

whats wrong, Mao Mao? wheres Badgerclops?

I think hes mad at me,, we had a misunderstanding- but its alright, dont worry- Adorabat.

oh,, well Im sure its gonna be okay!

Yeah,

All Alright

All the lights were off in the house for the sheriff and his deputies. The only light that was being emitted was coming from the television in the living room. Lounging on the couch, bathed in its glow, was a badger. His body was slouched down, legs propped up on the coffee table, and his wireless controller was in his claws for him to play his game. It was a perfect way for him to unwind after a long and tiring day.

As the badger continued to press the buttons on the controller, another figure entered the living room. It was a familiar black cat that every single resident of Pure Heart Valley knew well.

"Badgerclops," he spoke, walking over toward the sofa, "are you still playing that game?" His voice sounded exhausted.

"Oh hey, Mao Mao. I'm just trying to beat this level real quick before bed," the badger answered, not taking his one eye off the screen.

"You've said that for the last four nights and you're still on the same level," Mao Mao pointed out.

"I can do it this time, I know it!" Badgerclops claimed.

Mao Mao scoffed, "Not with that posture."

Badgerclops sat up, properly sitting on the couch with his back against the cushions, but his legs were still on the table. He didn't point out that he corrected his seating, but rather changed the subject.

"So did you finally get Adorabat to sleep?"

With a hint of pride in his voice, Mao Mao answered, "Yes, she is sleeping soundly now. I told her about one of our early adventurous exploits. It was against the mighty and monstrous Fing Fang Foom!" He walked around the couch, so as to not walk in front of Badgerclops as he was playing.

"Dude, that wasn't its name," the badger pointed out.

"It didn't tell us its name because we defeated them so fast!" Mao Mao retorted with a bit of attitude and pride. "Well, no matter, because Adorabat is now sleeping soundly after today's monster fight. She already sounds excited about the next monster alarm, that's for sure!"

"You know she's been getting into the riot gear again, right?"

"Again?! Grrr....I need to change that combination lock," a growl came from Mao Mao, it looked as if he was about to walk off to fix the issue.

"Yeah, I don't think having the combination be your birthday is really working out too well," Bagerclops snickered. Letting go of the controller with his organic claws, Badgerclops patted the seat cushion next to him before returning it to resume his gaming. "Don't worry about it right now. Just take a seat and relax, it's been along day."

Mao Mao looked down at the cushion that Badgerclops motioned to. As much as he wanted to go and

fix the lock while he was thinking about it, the sofa did look inviting. With a soft mumble, Mao Mao sat up on the center cushion of the couch, next to Badgerclops.

A few moments passed before Mao Mao made a comment about what he was seeing on the screen. "So you're controlling all characters in battle?"

"Yeah. It's easier than it seems, since everyone waits their turn to attack," Badgerclops answered, not taking his eyes of the screen.

"What's with that character's hair?" Mao Mao pointed to the screen.

"Him? He's a bit of a whiny main character. He's all 'dark and brooding', thinking being nothing but an angsty anti-hero is a good character trait for a main character to have," the badger said as he mindlessly pressed the buttons of his controller.

Mao Mao cleared his throat a little, "He....uh....he does have a prettynice-looking sword, though."

"Yeah, his sword is pretty cool," Badgerclops admitted.

The two sat in silence as the badger continued playing the game. The only lights and sounds came from the television. As Badgerclops continued to play, Mao Mao looked at his friend as he was lit up from the glow. Without saying a word, the black cat leaned his body toward Badgerclops until his head rested upon the badger's left leg. This surprised Badgerclops enough to hit pause.

"Whoa, dude. You okay?" Badgerclops said with a bit of confusion in his voice.

"Don't mind me," the cat grumbled, "Continue playing your game."

While still puzzled, Badgerclops simply shrugged and resumed playing. He did notice, however, that Mao Mao had taken his cape and wrapped himself up in it as he normally would if he were in his bed.

"Cozy?" Badgerclops asked with a small smile.

He didn't get a reply. Instead, Mao Mao looked forward to the screen and the game he was playing. A few moments of silence passed before Mao Mao did ask something;

"Badgerclops, do you think I'm good?"

"What now?" The badger didn't take his eyes off of the screen.

"Do you think I'm a good person?"

"Dude, where is this coming from?" Badgerclops asked with puzzlement.

Mao Mao was quiet. He looked forward in front of him at the screen, but really at nothing in particular. A soft sigh escaped from the cat before he spoke again, "I don't think I'm on the right path....the right path to become a legendary hero...."

Badgerclops pressed a few buttons on his controller, "What? Why do you think that?"

"Because," Mao Mao paused for a moment before continuing, "because I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere to be a hero. Sure, I'm sheriff of the entire Pure Heart Valley, but I don't think it's enough."

"Being sheriff is a big job, Mao Mao. I know I couldn't do it as well as you, it would cut deeply into my gaming time."

"It's not just that, though," the cat continued, "It's also about my dad, about how he always looked down on me. I always kept telling myself that my father toughened me up in his own way. But I began to see that was the furthest thing from the truth."

The badger chuckled a little, "Your dad's a butt."

"He's a legendary hero that is continuing a familial calling that has spanned generations."

"Yeah, but he's still a butt."

"I....can't entirely disagree with that. Blood is thicker than water, even if it is not as refreshing. But anyway, I just don't feel I'll ever measure up to him or my sisters, and...I'm really questioning if I'm on the right path to be a hero," Mao Mao stated, his paws gripped his cape that enveloped him.

"You're the sheriff of Pure Heart Valley, dude. There's more to being a hero than just....being a hero. It's about being your best self for others. You don't have to be perfect, dude, just be your best you." Badgerclops didn't take his eye off of his game as he spoke. "You gotta let go of all these thoughts that you aren't great. Do ya think any of the Sweetie-Pies could have absolutely wrecked those monsters or the Sky Pirates like you did with one hand tied behind their back?"

Mao Mao didn't reply. Instead, he closed his eyes and laid against Badgerclops' leg in silence.

As he continued to fiddle with his controller, Badgerclops broke the stillness by speaking up, "Hey Mao, what do you think makes a hero?"

"Oh, well, that's easy," Mao Mao answered with a hushed tone, "A hero is strong, quick, brave, and has to overcome impossible odds to be the best heroic version of themselves. It's just like my father taught me, and it's what I must become."

"Want to know what I think makes a hero? Someone who defends the helpless. Someone who fights for unity. Someone who can make mistakes and admit they're still learning. Someone to inspire hope to those in need. Someone who stands for justice. And someone with a really cool katana," Badgerclops smiled as he finished speaking. He then added as he looked down at the cat resting against his leg, "You don't have to be just like your dad, dude. Cause you're gonna be better."

A small but very warm smile crept onto Mao Mao's face at his friend's words.

"You might not get to be a legendary hero as fast as you might want to, but that's just how it is, dude. Your dad has his path, your sisters each have their paths. And you, you got your own path to go down," Badgerclops added, "And I ain't letting you go down it alone."

Mao Mao couldn't help but make a joke back to Badgerclops, "So that means I'm stuck with you?"

"Oh, you know it would get lonely without me!" Badgerclops laughed.

The smile on Mao Mao's face grew a bit more as he heard his friend's hearty laughter.

The television screen displayed a victory screen, causing Badgerclops to become excited, "Yes, finally! Took that dragon down. Heh, it's funny, he kind of looked like Fing Fang Foom, and he went down just like him!"

Mao Mao tilted his head up to look at Badgerclops from his lying position, "I thought you said that wasn't the monster's name."

"Eh, it has a ring to it. Or should I say, a 'Ring Rang Room' to it? Eh?!"

A snicker managed to escape from Mao Mao as he settled back against the badger's leg, "You're really dumb sometimes, you know that, Badgerclops?"

"Yeah, but I'm your dummy," Badgerclops answered as he rested his organic claw on top of Mao Mao's head. He gently started moving it to pet him, causing the cat to purr. "Feeling better, Mao?"

"Yeah. It's all alright."

END

A Hero's Motive

Every hero has a different motive.

But Mao Mao wasn't completely sure what his own was. He continued to ponder the thought as he walked through the valley, his deputy Badgerclops by his side. The Sheriff used to think his reason for being a hero was his family, mostly his father. But after adventuring around, meeting different people throughout the past few years, and battling new villains or monsters, he felt this was less likely. An empty feeling had appeared in his gut when Shin Mao had visited him, a feeling he couldn't describe any other way. The more he heard his father complain about the village and its apparent 'small' or 'weak' attributes, the less he felt the desire to impress him. Why was that, exactly? He couldn't figure it out himself.

"Hey, Mao, can we stop into the bakery for a minute?"

The cat's ear twitched, snapping out of his thoughts. He looked at the badger, who was pointing over to Muffins' shop across from them. A slightly irritated sigh came in response,

"Fine. But hurry up, we are supposed to be on patrol for another hour."

Badgerclops scoffed, turning towards the shop as he rolled his eye.

"Like you were paying attention in the first place."

Mao Mao glared at his co-hero, following close behind.

"I'm always paying attention! A hero is on guard at all times, remember? Or are you too busy thinking about food?"

"Well, I can think about both," Badgerclops spoke as he opened the door, "But yeah, I'll admit it's mostly food."

As the two entered the bakery, their noses were immediately hit with the strong aroma of sweets. Muffins, a yellow mouse who owned the shop, was standing across the counter full of decorative desserts.

"Welcome, Sheriff! So nice to see you here this afternoon!"

Badgerclops gave a warm smile towards the counter, his gaze settled on the pastries. He and Muffins had begun a conversation, which Mao Mao only heard bits and pieces of. Simply because, he was struggling to pay attention. The previous question was still deep in his mind. If his family wasn't his motive to be a hero anymore, then what was?

A familiar name suddenly hit him. Maybe it was Bao Bao.

He and his former dog friend were so close, they grew up side by side, with their life adventure starting as a duo. Nobody could stop them, villain or not. That was, until the horrific day he quickly decided not to think upon. He slightly shook his head, realizing Badgerclops had already ordered a tray full of sweets. He huffed in annoyance,

"Badgerclops, you said we were only stopping in here for a minute."

His co-hero turned his head, holding his tray as he stepped over to one of the tables across from them.

"We are! C'mon, man, you know I can scarf this down in seconds. Do you want a cupcake or something?"

The cat gave him a stern look, hesitating before going over and sitting across from him at the table.

"Fine, I'll have one."

Badgerclops chuckled a bit as he handed him one of the cupcakes from his tray. Mao Mao stared at the dessert for a moment, his thoughts seeming to always drift back to before. He wasn't sure why it was bothering him this much. Did he really need a motive, a purpose? Maybe he just wanted to be a hero, well, because. Because it's right. That was good enough for him. Or, it should've been. But he didn't feel any satisfaction. Bao Bao brought too much of a bad memory to be his sole purpose for his dreams. If not him, or his family members, then...

"Alright, dude, we can go back to patrol now. You ever gonna finish that cupcake?"

Mao Mao glanced down to see his barely-eaten treat in his hand, which he wasn't particularly hungry for.

Shaking his head, he reached over and placed it on his partner's tray.

"Nah, you can have it."

The badger noticed his lack of focus, which was definitely odd for him. Badgerclops stood up from the table, eating the cupcake before speaking up again.

"Something the matter, Mao? You seem distracted. Like, really distracted."

The Sheriff's eyes widened a bit. Was it that noticeable? Guess he wasn't that great at thinking to himself without changing his demeanor.

"Oh, no, I'm fine. Well...yeah, I'm not distracted. Just thinking."

The two began heading out of the shop, with a quick goodbye wave to Muffins beforehand. Badgerclops continued the conversation once they were back on the patrol route.

"Thinking about what? Must be something heavy if it's got you all quiet."

Should he be honest with him? Well, if Mao Mao had to be honest with anybody, it'd be Badgerclops. Adorabat was a second option, but she was in school that day. Plus, she wouldn't understand this kind of question. He didn't seem to get it himself. If he didn't, who would?

"You wouldn't get it. It's a...hero thing."

His partner frowned at that response,

"Uhh, am I not a co-hero all of a sudden, or what? Just tell me, dude. It's clearly bugging you."

Maybe that wasn't the best way to put it, after all. The cat sighed deeply, still walking down through the village as he stared out in front of him.

"Fine...Badgerclops, what's your motive for being a hero?"

He looked over towards his partner beside him, who seemed a bit confused.

"My motive?"

"Yes. Like, your reason for wanting to be a hero rather than anything else." He answered, slightly annoyed that he had to explain the word's meaning.

"I know what motive means, dude! But, uh, I guess if I had to choose one, it'd be you."

Mao Mao paused at that reply. He stopped walking and stood abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk, causing Badgerclops to stop as well.

"Me?" He repeated, uncertainty in his voice.

The badger shrugged, not understanding the shock his partner was expressing. "Well, yeah. You're the one that gave me a chance to be someone better instead of a lousy, fake-accented villain with no standards. I'd probably still be with them if we hadn't met."

All of that was true. Well, the last part was unknown, but he hadn't thought of it like that before. He knew their bond was strong, they'd done so much together in the past few years. He trusted Badgerclops more than anyone he could think of.

It suddenly hit him.

He and Badgerclops, despite their common bickering and occasional fights, were always helping each other. If Mao Mao ever had any trouble, Badgerclops was there to push him through it. He had learned so many things since they met, whether it was not always following the hero's code or accepting his own imperfections. He always felt like a better hero when he gained im-provement, and Badgerclops was always there when that happened.

"I guess I never thought of it like that." Mao Mao said, giving a small smile afterwards. The co-hero grinned in return.

"Yeah. It doesn't have to be some complicated reason, just one that feels real to you. But, is that what you've been doing? Figuring out your motive?"

Both of them began their patrol route once more, with the Sheriff shaking his head lightly.

"No, I think after hearing your motive, I'm certain on my own now. So, thank you."

Badgerclops chuckled slightly, "You're welcome, man. Mind telling me what it is?"

Mao Mao felt a slight blush appear on his face, but he didn't mind. He answered in confidence,

"You are, Badgerclops. You're my motive."

"Aw, stop it," his partner giggled, "you'll get me flustered. But seriously, dude, I'm always happy to help you with your dreams."

The duo walked closer next to each other, hands nearly touching. Mao Mao took a deep breath, exhaling in relief. Sometimes he needs to learn not to overthink such questions, when his answer was in front of him the entire time. He was proud to have Badgerclops as his motive, and to know he was the purpose for Badgerclops to be who he is.

He wouldn't want it any other way.

Useless

He pressed his youthful body up against the ugly brown peeling wall behind him, his small frame trembling against his will. He paused near the opening of a tall doorway, the crooked door beside him opened just a small crack. Silently, he mentally steeled himself for what he was about to do, inhaling deeply through his nose. One quivering clawed hand tightly grasped the front of his ratty green-colored vest, and the other clenched an important piece of paper to his chest.

Maybe, this time she would-?

He reluctantly released the fabric of his vest from his fingers and extended his hand, preparing to knock upon the surface of the wooden door. His hand faltered within the air when the door opened all the way on its own, an audible squeak echoing throughout the hallway he was standing in. His singular bright blue eye widened in surprise once his gaze landed upon the person slipping out of the adjoining room.

"Momma?"

His mother strolled out into the hallway, her tall white-and-brown figure easily towering over his own. Slight patches of gray streaked her thinner fur and curled tufts of longer hair were styled around the top of her head. His mother jumped at the sound of his young voice and, as she twisted her head to look at him, he quickly drew the hand containing the piece of paper behind his back.

If his mother noticed the movement, she didn't say anything about it. Instead, she merely smiled down at him, the corners of her eyes crinkling in response. "Oh, there you are, sweetie," she chirped, sweetly.

He forced himself to not flinch at the overly sugary nickname. He really wished that she'd only call him by his actual name. She only used that particular name whenever she wanted something from him. His eye drifted down towards his mother's hand, taking note of the large blueprint that was clenched in her left fist.

He unconsciously squeezed the piece of paper behind his back.

His mother kneeled down before him, her stiff smile still firmly in place. "I was just about to look for you."

"Y-yeah?" He stammered, uneasily. "W-well, I was looking for you, too, momma. I wanted to-"

His mother grabbed his shoulder and pulled him close, interrupting him amid his sentence. "I really need you to utilize that special gift of yours for me, sweetie. What I want is for you to build me one of these." She unrolled the blueprint, sticking it into his face. It was a sketch of an overly complicated machine of some sort. What the said machine did, he had absolutely no idea.

But, then again, he never really did.

His mother rolled the blueprints back up, and she shoved it into his hand. "We've got some clients

who would pay big money for this machine. And, you know that you're the only one capable of making something like this," she complimented him, lightly.

She rarely used such kind(ish) words when she wanted him to do something for her. Otherwise, her mouth was usually filled with the occasional insult.

"B-but momma," he stammered. "I-"

His mother's hand tightened on his shoulder. "Please, sweetie. Don't you want to make your momma happy?"

He paused, swallowing the rest of his protest, and he looked down at his feet. More than anything, he did want his mother to be happy. "Okay, momma," he muttered, quietly.

"That's my boy," his mother purred, ruffling the fur on top of his head.

Suddenly, she stopped, her eyes focusing on something else.

"What's that behind your back?"

He froze. Before he could even come up with an excuse, his mother was reaching behind his back.

"Wait, momma!"

It was too late.

His mother snatched the piece of paper from his hand, and she peered down at it. His heart pounded loudly in his ears as he watched her false smile turn wicked.

"Oh, sweetie," she chuckled, condescendingly. She waved the paper in the air. It was a crayon drawing of an invention he'd been considered making. He'd wanted to show her in hopes of her agreeing to let him make it. "You're still making these useless inventions."

They're not useless, he wanted to scream, but it was as if his throat had suddenly closed up, cutting off any words.

"You only need to make what I tell you," her cruel smile seemed to grow before his eye. "That's the only way for you to succeed, after all."

And, grinning her plastic smile, his mother promptly tore his drawing in half.

Badgerclops abruptly popped up in his sleeping bag, the top of his head brushing against the orange tent he was in. He sat there for a moment, panting heavily, sweat dripping down his face. The cybernetic badger rubbed a hand over his face, and he breathed deeply through his nose.

What a dream, he thought to himself.

Badgerclops' sighed, and he took a moment to look around his surroundings. He immediately took notice of the empty sleeping bag tucked away in the corner of the tent. The baggy sleeping bag was

virtually untouched, and the lip of it was still peeled open. It seemed as if it wasn't even slept in, in the first place.

Badgerclops furrowed his eyebrows.

Where's Mao Mao?

That was the weird name of the justice-obsessed cat he'd been traveling with for the past few months. The feline helped rescue him after the Thicket Thieves deserted him, leaving him to practically die trapped underneath fiery rubble.

Badgerclops slowly unzipped the sleeping bag, his fingers trembling.

After choosing to accompany Mao Mao on his journey to become legendary, the feline seemed to be unnaturally determined to teach him how to become a better person. Despite his small size, Mao Mao was strangely violent and angry, always gearing for some sort of ght. But, for the most part, Badgerclops found himself enjoying his presence.

Badgerclops crawled towards the opening of the tent, and he slowly tugged the zipper down. Fresh, chilly air slapped Badgerclops in the face, and he gratefully drew it into his lungs. He climbed out of the tent and stretched, his eye drawn to the sky above. The sky was a mixture of black and blue, and white, twinkling stars ooded the murky backdrop. The gentle light from the stars lightly illuminated the surrounding area, and Badgerclops took a quick look around.

The campsite that he and Mao Mao chose was located near the edge of a small cli. A few feet away, close to the edge of the cli, a campre ercely burned surrounded behind a couple of logs. When Badgerclops squinted, his eye immediately honed onto the short black shape sitting on one of the logs. Almost automatically, Badgerclops found himself strolling towards it, the grass crunching underneath his feet.

As Badgerclops drew close, he opened his mouth to call out to the shape. “Hey, Mao Mao.”

The feline jumped, and he quickly turned his head. When he saw Badgerclops, he hued out an annoyed breath. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Yep,” Badgerclops plopped down beside him, the log creaking under his weight. He was pleased to know that the cat didn't stop him. “It’s just me.”

He looked out over the cliside, staring out at the trees and the shining crescent moon. The serene moment was ruined when he felt a stare burning into his side. Badgerclops twisted his head to the side, and he found Mao Mao openly peering up at him, the feline’s glowing green eyes focused on his face.

"Uh, what?" Badgerclops questioned, feeling uncomfortable with all the attention. "Is there something on my face?"

He took his esh hand, and he felt around his face. Suddenly, he felt a distinct wetness around his eye. He must've been crying during his dream earlier. Quietly, Badgerclops used his arm to rub away the leftover tears.

“Are you okay?"

Badgerclops inched, startled by both the question, and the gentle tone that occupied it. But, when he turned to Mao Mao, the cat was staring out over the cliside. Realizing he was probably waiting for a reply, Badgerclops sucked in a quick breath.

"Yeah. I’m good. I just," Badgerclops rolled his shoulders, pausing for a moment. He wasn't sure why.

"Had a bad dream."

Badgerclops' cheeks burned in embarrassment. He suddenly felt like a little kid, crying over a nightmare.

If Mao Mao noticed, he didn't say anything. Instead, he picked up a log and threw it into the fire, the fire briefly aring up as it devoured the wood. For a second, Badgerclops assumed that Mao Mao decided to drop the topic altogether when he suddenly spoke up.

"A bad dream, huh," Mao Mao cleared his throat. "What was it about?"

Badgerclops scratched his chin, hoping to hide the fact that he was surprised by Mao Mao's question. He didn't think the cat would've asked him something so personal. Mao Mao wasn't exactly known to be an aectionate and feely guy.

"Well-"

Badgerclops found himself hesitating again. He knew Mao Mao for only a couple of months now. Even when he'd been with the Thicket Thieves for the last several years of his life, they weren't exactly the most accepting of him. In the end, the only thing he'd received from being with that group of villains was nothing but a bad accent and healing burn marks.

How did he know that the same thing wouldn't happen with Mao Mao?

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Mao Mao muttered, quietly.

"No. I mean, it's not like that." Badgerclops sighed, running a hand down his face. "It's just that it dealt with my mom. She wasn't all that..." he tried to search for the right word. "Nice to me when I was a kid."

Badgerclops swallowed. There he said it. He waited for Mao Mao to say something. He fully expected something along the lines of harassment to come out of the usually rude cat's mouth at his confession. At least, Badgerclops wouldn't completely put it past him to say that.

However, instead of any of that happening, Mao Mao looked at him, green connecting with a burnt blue. "I understand," he said, simply.

Badgerclops blinked. He hadn't expected that. "You do?"

Mao Mao looked away, his eyes somewhere else. "My dad didn't always have a lot of time for me. He always focused more on my older sisters. A lot of times, I was left out."

"Uh, sorry, man," Badgerclops supplied, puzzled.

For the rst time, Badgerclops felt like he could relate to Mao Mao.

"And, anyway, it doesn't matter," Mao Mao stood on top of their shared log. "I know one day I'll become a legendary hero and be accepted by my family!" The feline dramatically posed with his hand in the air, loudly crackling.

Badgerclops stared at the cat, speechless. He couldn't help but wonder where Mao Mao got all that spirit. The way he had made it sound earlier, his family had almost completely cut him out of the equation. Yet, somehow, Mao Mao managed to take the high road in life, desiring to prove his family wrong. But, Badgerclops chose the low road, hoping to become a bad guy in the hopes of proving his mom wrong.

Why was that?

"H-how can you be so sure?" Badgerclops asked, softly, curiously. Mao Mao instantly hushed at his question, his arm lowering from its raised position. "I mean, how do you know they won't throw you away the moment that you're not, you know," he balled up his sts. "Useless."

He nally took note of the cat's sudden silence, and he turned his head to look at Mao Mao. The feline stood there, staring at Badgerclops with an unreadable expression. The cybernetic badger froze, and he glanced away from Mao Mao's inquisitive eyes, clenching his fists.

Badgerclops started when he felt a small hand rest upon his broad shoulder. When he turned, he found Mao Mao standing before him. "You're not useless, Badgerclops." The feline placed his other hand on Badgerclops' shoulder. "You've come a long way since you joined up with me. You've proven yourself capable of becoming a good person. Even more than that, you've proven that you can become a great hero. So, don't you dare call yourself 'useless'. Because I know you're more than that."

Badgerclops blinked, stunned at the sudden large speech. Then, he found himself smiling for the rst time since he'd woken up. Raising an arm, he abruptly pulled Mao Mao into a large hug, drawing a yelp from the feline. "Thanks, man."

Mao Mao hued in his grasp, and he softly patted Badgerclops on the back. Badgerclops missed the small smile that crossed the cat's lips. "No problem, Badgerclops."

Boyfriend Acquired!

LOVE?

PHHHH

PIECE of CAKE~

Two Heroes On A Rainy Day

Droplets of rain stayed falling from above, hitting the tin roof, as the calming sound could be heard throughout the small cafe. Water drops streamed down the windows of the building at different speeds. The sight of the soothing scene caught a certain cat's attention, though, as he stared out the window for a moment. He gave a relaxed smile and basked in the peace for a split second, before getting abruptly pulled out of his moment of tranquility.

"Yo, Mao!"

A Badger suddenly called out.

"I think I'm gonna get, like...a whole breakfast platter. Maybe *TWO* whole breakfast platters!"

The sudden spark in conversation made Mao Mao groan a bit, as he turned his head to look back at the man seated in front of him.

"Uhm...that's a lot of food, Badgerclops."

"And *I'm* a lot of *badger*!"

The chubbier man sassily retorted, dramatically putting his hand over his chest, as if he was actually hurt from what the cat had said to him. The reaction made Mao Mao's mood quickly change, the badger now gaining a small chuckle from the heroic cat in front of him. The sight of the stubborn feline's beaming face and the sound of his adorable laugh, of course, made Badgerclops give a shining grin. Just the fact that he could make Mao Mao smile altogether brightened his day much more.

"I'm glad we just get to chillax today, Lil' Mao. No monsters, no upset villagers...just you and I getting to spend time together."

Badgerclops explained with a small smile on his face, as he looked out the window. Mao Mao looked at him as he spoke, giving the tall badger his full attention. A tiny smile tugged at his lips, as he listened to the man speak before he slowly nodded in agreement with what he had mentioned. Even with how busy and overzealous Mao Mao was, the feline couldn't help but admit that he did appreciate the off-time he and his partner got.

Dreary days like these were barely ever busy...it was strange that monsters, as well as their nemesis', the Sky Pirates, hardly ever came out on rainy days, but the cat couldn't blame them. He would also prefer spending the day off with such relaxing weather.

"Yeah...these days always seem to be the best."

Mao Mao simply replied, softening his voice a bit as he spoke. Badgerclops finally looked back over at the hero with a big smile and continued the conversation.

"*Ha*! Do you remember before we got to Pure Heart? That one day it started raining and you had spent like...*TWO HOURS* trying to start up a fire, *only* for it to be washed out?"

Badgerclops sputtered out between his own little giggles, before finally letting out one big laugh at the end of his story. This received a groan and playful eye roll from the cat that the memory was centered around.

"Pft...don't even remind me of that. Took *forever* to make that fire, then *boom*!"

Mao Mao began to rant about the past situation, using his hand to talk as he did so. Badgerclops couldn't help but laugh even more at the cat's upset response. The sudden rise in laughter earned a little head tilt from the feline, though. Finally, he decided to talk back.

"Aye! It wasn't *that* funny!"

"Whatever, dude. I literally watched tears fall down your face when that happened."

Badgerclops spat back, as he imitated the cat and pretended to wipe away a fake, singular tear from his closed eye. He continued to give little giggles before they slowly came to a stop, feeling the small hero's eyes glaring right up at him. He cleared his throat, before hearing Mao Mao begin to speak up again.

"I'll have you know those were not *tears*...it was *raining*, Badgerclops."

"Yeah, yeah. Same difference!"

Mao Mao couldn't help the small smile that cracked onto his face from his partner's response. Yeah, the sensitive cat was a little upset that the badger had accused him of crying, but he could never stay mad at the man for something that small...especially since that man was none other than Badgerclops.

"*Ugh*...you're such a dork."

Mao Mao mumbled with a warm smile on his face, as he shook his head a little bit. As dumb and overdramatic as the badger may be, Mao Mao of course still adored every little thing about him.

Badgerclops' heart also warmed hearing the shorter man's reply and seeing the little smile on his face. He raised a brow though, as he began to think a bit deeper about some memories they shared.

"Hm...I remember when we first got to cuddle up together."

Badgerclops suddenly mentioned with a warm grin as he looked down at the table. Of course, the topic of him and the tall badger cuddling made Mao Mao quickly fluster up. The cat vigorously tapped his index finger against the tabletop, not being exactly able to sit still. Hearing the tapping, Badgerclops looked back at the cat with a tiny giggle. He could tell just from the feline's body language and lightly flushed face just how embarrassed he was from such a simple topic.

"Yeah...it was actually on a rainy day, like today, Lil' Mao!"

The larger mammal spoke again, trying to get the hero even more flustered. He watched, but the cat just seemed to cross his arms and look out the window. Badgerclops tilted his head in response then thought for a moment. His head immediately straightened though once he thought of something to say.

"Y'know? What if we reenacted that night? You and I just getting to cuddle when we get home?"

Badgerclops began to suggest, a smug smirk tugging at his lips. The cat's glowing eyes quickly widened, then darted over at the other mammal. He groaned a bit more, his face growing redder by the second. The other said animal, of course, noticed this and kept that same smirk plastered on his face from the sight.

'Hehe...mission accomplished!'

Badgerclops thought, as he stared and admired the man sitting in front of him. The dark cat could feel the badger staring his way, so he jolted his head to look in front of him, and to glare right back in his partner's direction.

"Let's talk about something else."

Mao Mao finally spoke with a quietened voice. This just made the bigger animal chuckle a bit.

"Why are you so embarrassed, dear?"

He began to tease the cat further, keeping a smug smile as he looked at the shorter man. Mao Mao rolled his emerald eyes as his face grew a darker shade.

"Y'know...I came here for a *good* and *relaxing* time, Badgerclops. Not to be *harassed* and *teased* by my partner the whole time!"

Badgerclops just simply laughed at the dark cat's sudden outburst and shook his head. He finally cleared his throat to calm himself a bit.

"It's okay to talk and get all embarrassed! I still love ya either way, Lil' Mao!"

The Badger explained with a reassuring smile, as he kept his eyes on the other mammal. He used one of his hands to mess around with one of the sugar packets on their table as he talked.

Mao Mao's ears perked a little though to what the man had stated. His eyes instantly went to Badgerclops's face, hearing the words 'I love you' fall from his mouth. Those words oddly enough always made the cat feel giddy. Specifically hearing it from his best partner made him feel worthy... special. It was such a different feeling. Another sudden wave of nervousness and joy. He couldn't help but begin to tap the table with his gloved paw again.

The noise of the elastic and rubber-y glove hitting the hardwood table soon enough grabbed Badgerclops' attention for a second time.

Tap, tap, tap.

The sound grew louder in the badger's head this time, though, as he looked down a bit and kept his focus on the small hand fidgeting away. Feeling the feline's eyes on him, seeing his smile, watching how flustered he was...it built up a warm feeling inside the badger. That feeling completely overcame him as he suddenly grabbed onto the hand that was in his sight. The gesture - of course - startled the cat

at first, making him stiffen up a bit. Eventually, Mao Mao melted into the touch. He softened up to the feeling of his partner's hand on his. He kept his eyes on the taller creature, a small smile still tugging on his lips.

"Thanks...I love you too, Badgerclops."

Mao Mao finally responded. He surprisingly didn't try to break away from the contact...the cat didn't even budge! The small action, as well as the cat's statement, made the badger smile like a dork.

"What can I get you two fine gentlemen?"

The heroic animals were soon interrupted from their little moment, ready for their order to be taken by the mouse that stood in front of their table. The two men kept their smiles from their previous interaction, hands now intertwined, as they finally began to answer the waitress. The rain stayed pouring as she took the two's order...even when she walked away, the soothing rain, mixed with the echo of laughter from our two heroes, could still be heard throughout the cafe. Such a comforting and relaxing sound it was. Two, oblivious love birds just sharing their day with each other, enjoying their time - even with the awkward and embarrassing moments. The duo wouldn't have wanted their morning to go any other way.

M♥B

O Holy Night

Twas the night before Christmas,
And all through HQ,
A pair of heroes were stirring,
A cat, and badger too.
Some new stockings were hung,
By the chimney with care,
In the hopes that St.Snugglemagne,
Soon would be there.

Or at least, that's what Mao Mao and Badgerclops had told their young protégée as they sent her off to bed that serene Christmas Eve night. She protested, of course, but once the two told her St. Snugglemagne wouldn't come to children who stayed awake, she finally agreed.

It had been less than forty-eight hours since the young bat had offhandedly mentioned that she was the only one in her skewl that had never celebrated the holidays before, a comment so surprising that even the usually stoic cat was forced to turn his head around in shock.

Normally, Badgerclops and Mao Mao regarded most holidays with only fleeting interest, too busy on the road as traveling heroes to really have time to waste on made up days to simply buy things. Christmas however... that was something different. It was a day that carried heavy weight for the two of them; heavy, but good. Memories and cherished conversations from their past that made that winter day too special to ignore, and allowing Adorabat to miss even one more second of it was something that Mao Mao declared was beyond unacceptable.

Since then, everything had been a mad dash towards that day of merriment: secret meetings in Badgerclop's lab, shopping trips disguised as scouting for monsters, Mao Mao even going so far as to swallow his pride and calling his folks to ask for some of their holiday recipes.

And now here it was, merely an hour before midnight, when the cat and badger took a step back and looked over the work that they had pulled off so far.

For HQ's living room, it was as if a holiday bomb had exploded directly in the middle of everything. Ribbons and streamers of festive colors adorned every wall and door of their home. Reindeer and elves made out of homemade crafts were shoved into every nook and cranny while wreaths of scented pine needles and winter berries hung upon windows to give their home a spiced aroma. Nutcrackers stood sentry at a multitude of doorways, Yuletide guardians keeping watch in anticipation of the joyous morning to come.

More than that, though, they were an unmoving audience for the one last job still yet to be done.

It stood nearly as tall as the ceiling, the Christmas tree they both had picked out from Farmer Bun's collection. It was the final yet most important task left for them to do, and in the soft glow of the fireplace, logs safely ablaze behind a metal screen, they set to work adorning it with an arsenal of lights and decorations.

"Dude you're putting way too much on that side, it's gonna fall!"

"Badgerclops, this is a real tree! Don't get sticky sap everywhere!"

"For the third time dude, Geraldine is not a decoration and you *cannot* put her in the tree..."

The work was slow, but enjoyable. Periodically, in the soft glow of the firelight, Mao would sneak discreet looks over at his co-hero, his partner, his boyfriend, watching the determined focus in his eye present itself as it had when it first drew Mao Mao in all those years ago. Even through the hushed bickering here and there, Mao couldn't stop from smiling when, out of the corner of his own eye, he would notice Badgerclops sneaking the exact same glances.

"Well, that's it," the feline stated, rubbing his gloved paws together to signal a job well done, "Thirty-

six strings of different colored lights, one hundred and twenty eight immaculate ornaments, and one glistening star nestled on top of the finest tree in Pure Heart Valley. It's almost too perfect to take down once the new year hits."

"Almost too perfect?" Badgerclops asked. "This is probably our best work yet and you wanna say almost? What could possibly be missing?"

The cat smirked, "You haven't noticed yet?" There was a glint in his eye, and just as the badger opened his mouth to respond, the cat seemed to vanish.

"Dude where are you – ??"

Mao Mao was already out of the room and bounding up the attic stairs before Badgerclops could even finish. His words fell on deaf ears anyway as the sable cat was single-mindedly focused on finding what had been stashed away for so long.

It was only a few minutes later that he came sauntering back into the living room, blowing dust off a small, ornately carved box.

Even in the dimming glow of the fire Mao could see the badger's eye widen about as far as it could.

"Is that…?"

"Mhm," the cat neatly replied with a curt nod and an ever growing smile. He walked over towards the badger and sat down on the floor in front of the tree. Badgerclops followed suit, his eye still trained on the box.

"It's only been a couple of years since we last had it out right?" Badgerclops asked. "It's kinda crappy of me to say but I had nearly forgotten about it."

"To be fair, there was no reason to have it out last year, considering what happened," Mao Mao replied. He gingerly tilted the box so that the bottom was facing him, tapping the wooden panel in the middle twice until it loosened and fell away, revealing a key. Twisting it into the lock, the two heard the latch softly click. Mao Mao opened the lid to reveal four odd and unique ornaments, no physical theme or color to connect them together in any way that anyone other than the two of them would understand.

Silently, Mao pulled out the first ornament, a mischievously grinning weasel with a sack of presents hoisted behind him as if ready to make a daring escape. Mao Mao softly held it in his paws and looked up at the badger. "Remember this one?" the cat asked.

"How could I not? It's the very first one we got together. The first year we met, the first Christmas we spent together," Badgerclops replied.

They were looking for a town with a rumored monster bounty when suddenly a snowstorm descended upon them. Mao Mao had argued to push ahead, that he just knew the town was close by, but the badger refused. Eventually the feline acquiesced and they set up camp for the night.

Huddled beneath a blanket in their one tent together as the wind whipped outside ferociously, the two eventually fell asleep cuddled next to each other. For warmth, of course, they had both agreed, but as Mao felt those arms around him, arms almost as big as himself, he felt a pull somewhere deep in his gut. He didn't know what it was, what it could be, or what it eventually would be, he just knew that he felt it.

The next morning, as the snow cleared, the two saw that the village had indeed only been a mile away, too hard to see when the storm had started raging. Badgerclops apologized through his laughter and made it up to the cat with a meal. It was there at the inn that the two remembered it was Christmas morn, and, on a whim, Mao bought an ornament from the local shopkeep; the thieving weasel to com-memorate their time together, and to remind the badger of how far he had come from his time as a villain.

"Oh! What about this one?" Badgerclops asked excitedly, removing the second ornament from the box as Mao Mao hung the first one up on the tree.

"Oh yeah," the cat said, turning to look. In the badger's hand was a small ornamental cup made to look like it held green tea. "You bought that one, right?"

"I did, for you. It was our first date together. I wanted something to remember it by."

"I think to this day I'm still surprised you asked me out," the cat said with a smirk.

"One of us had to do it. We both knew we wanted to and I just couldn't hold it in anymore. The curse of being so emotionally honest…"

"Badgerclops, you've got the emotional intelligence of a goldfish. I may be cardboard in that area but that still just makes you a–"

"*Anyway*," the badger said firmly enough to cut off the cat's words. "I knew I had to do it. I'd known for a long time that I wanted too, but I guess I was worried you would say no. Your face going as red as your cape was all the answer I needed though," he smugly finished.

The cat crossed his arms and looked away in embarrassment. "You were the first person to ever ask me out," he mumbled. "How was I supposed to react?"

"Exactly the way you did," Badgerclops replied as he stood up and moved himself closer to his boyfriend. He cupped the feline's face in his hands and (with only slight resistance from the cat) turned it so that their eyes met before gingerly kissing him square on the nose. He then turned to the tree to add his ornament. "That night we went ice skating, and I got so cold that you made your mom's special green tea for me. The very next day I saw the ornament in a storefront and had to buy it."

Mao Mao smiled at the memory and bent down to pick up the third trinket from the box. "By that point, getting one of these every year just sort of became a tradition," he said. You bought this one too, but for me it's the one that means the most."

Mao Mao brought it up to eye level and watched as the glow of the fire reflected off of it, an ornament of a silvery metallic heart with a small crack placed purposefully in the middle of it. A fake bandage placed across to patch it over. They both stared at it in silence, the mood growing tense as memories flooded back into both of them.

"That was the first time you told me you loved me," the badger whispered, remembering.

"That was the first time I told you I loved you," the cat whispered back like an echo.

The badger looked up to meet the cat's eyes, "We were fighting a monster. I took a hit pretty hard."

"All that red in the snow... I thought I would lose you."

"Dude," Badgerclops chuckled, extending his robo arm to ruffle Mao's head fur. "Half of my body is metal. It's gonna take more than a scratch to get rid of me."

Seizing on that faint moment of levity, Badgerclops bent down to pick up the last ornament; a perfectly crusted pie. "Now this one is easily my favorite and no, before you say it, it is not because it looks like food."

"I know, it's because I made a public fool of myself," the cat grimaced, arms now folded in irritation.

"Oh come on man, it could have been worse. Yeah, I met your parents for the first time un-invited at your family's Christmas thing. And sure, maybe your dad made fun of me until you blew up in his face, loudly proclaimed us lovers, and then stormed out with a string of curses I never knew existed, but you finally stood up to him!"

Mao Mao furrowed his brow, "I completely embarrassed myself."

"But you embarrassed yourself for me, and that meant a lot. Plus, look on the brightside," the badger said, now openly laughing, "You ate so much cobbler that night."

"Three of my sisters still haven't spoken to me," the cat said.

"Then just talk to me three times more," Badgerclops replied, playfully nudging his feline partner as he set the ornament on the tree.

They stood back for a second time to look over their creation.

"Perfect now?" Badgerclops asked.

"Almost," the cat said, feigning an air of concentration.

"Dude, that's everything. What could possibly be missing?"

The cat turned his head up to grin at his boyfriend. Mao Mao moved his arm around to reach inside one of the pockets of his cape. "This," he said as he tossed a small box in the air.

The badger gave a small yelp in surprise and grabbed the box right as it reached eye level. He slowly turned it around in his hand, giving Mao Mao a puzzled look as the cat matched it with a smirk.

Inside was a miniature wooden carving of the three of them. Mao Mao and Badgerclops with an arm around each other, and Adorabat beaming in between them.

"Where did you get this?" the badger asked, his eye wide in surprise as he looked over the new ornament.

"I made it myself. I knew you'd fight me about putting Geraldine in the tree, so I figured using her to carve something nice would be as good," he replied, a hand reaching out to take the figurine back. "Not so bad for emotional cardboard, huh?"

"But, I don't get it..." the badger said. "What's the special occasion?"

Mao Mao chuckled with a faint smile as he placed the ornament right in the center of the tree. "Badgerclops, this is the first Christmas with all three of us as a family. What could possibly be more special than that?"

AND WHEN I HAD THEM CORNERED, I LIFTED GERALDINE HIGH FOR THE FINAL BLOW...

AND THEN WHAT??

AW YOU STILL SAY YOUR SWORD'S NAME? THAT'S KINDA CUTE MAN.

AND THEN, I SHOUTED TO THE HEAVENS-

GAHH-

OOP I GOTCHA!

MAN YOU'RE CLUMSY. AT LEAST YOU'RE CUTE.

BADGERCLOPS!! ALWAYS LET A HERO FALL WITH GRACE!

HAHA WHATEVER YOU TOTALLY LOVE IT.

WAIT...IM CONFUSED...

Day Off

"Gone? What do you mean *gone*?!" Mao Mao yelled. Badgerclops stood before him, unphased by the torrent of flying spittle. He was used to Mao Mao's... *strong* reactions to bad news at this point.

"Yeah dude, I scanned the whole valley. Their ship's empty too." The Aerocycle was still warm behind Badgerclops's back, steam curling from its magical engine as the last droplets of the waterfall sizzled away. He unclipped his helmet and hooked it on one of the handlebars. "Do you think they're planning something?"

"Of COURSE they're planning something, Badgerclops! They're villains!" Mao Mao began to pace around the garage, muttering under his breath and counting possibilities on his fingers. "They could have snuck away to find some kind of powerful weapon... Or maybe they're still here, making a secret attack on the Ruby Pure Heart... Of course, there's always the chance that they're waiting for us to let our guard down... Maybe-"

Mao Mao felt his feet lift off the floor as Badgerclops scooped him up from behind without warning. He squirmed against Badgerclops's grip under his arms for a moment, then sighed and resigned himself to being held. Badgerclops gave him a gentle kiss on the top of his head.

"Hey man," Badgerclops said, "Don't get caught up in what *might* go wrong, okay? If the sky pirates are gone, that means more quiet time for us. Let's just enjoy it." He gently placed Mao Mao back on the ground, patting his head. "Where's Adorabat?"

"Skewl," Mao Mao mumbled, hiding his face in his cape. He and Badgerclops had been boyfriends for a while, but he still wasn't used to random displays of affection. Not that he didn't like them, of course; sometimes he really needed those reminders that Badgerclops loved him. But even after so much time together, part of him was still embarrassed.

"So..." Badgerclops said as they climbed the stairs to the living room. "What now? The kid's gone, we have the whole day to ourselves..."

Mao Mao looked around uncertainly. "I... don't know. Usually there's a monster to fight."

Badgerclops frowned at him. "Dude, don't you have like, hobbies?"

"Of course I do!" Mao Mao huffed, crossing his arms. "I train, I polish my sword, I meditate..."

Badgerclops laughed. "That's not 'day off' stuff, dude. Come on," he said, settling in on their beloved couch, "let's cuddle and read for a bit."

Mao Mao blushed, fur bristling subconsciously. With some embarrassment, he set himself down between Badgerclops's legs and rested his head on the bottom of Badgerclops's stomach. It was a com-fortable position, one they'd found themselves in before on sleepless nights. But it was always something they gradually shifted into as the night wore on; squeezing in with Badgerclops so intentionally made his heart flutter.

When Mao Mao was all settled, Badgerclops leaned down to give him a gentle kiss on the top of his head, then began to read. Mao Mao closed his eyes for a moment, feeling Badgerclops's stomach expand and contract beneath his head. Occasionally he could hear the sound of Badgerclops turning a page. He had his own book he could read, of course, but... Maybe a little rest wouldn't be so bad. It *was* their day off, after all. For a while, his thoughts wandered. He relaxed his muscles, letting the full weight of his head rest on Badgerclops's body. The sudden disappearance of the Sky Pirates seemed like less of a problem than it had just moments before.

Then an odd tingling rolled up Mao Mao's spine, followed by a prickling in his skin. Badgerclops's fur on the back of his neck was suddenly too rough, his rising and falling stomach too warm. Mao Mao began to wiggle uncomfortably, clenching and unclenching his fists. Finally he disentangled himself from Badgerclops's legs and fought his way upright, gasping like he'd barely escaped drowning.

Badgerclops peered at him over the spine of his book, concerned. "You good?" Mao Mao looked away, suddenly agitated. His whole body was itching for movement. The soft surfaces of the couch were suffocating. He felt so full of energy that demanded to be spent, it was hard to even think. But if he got

up and trained now, he'd prove Badgerclops right about not being able to take a day off....

Against his body's will, Mao Mao reached for his book. But Badgerclops stopped him, grabbing his hand and sitting up as well. "Hey," he said gently, "how about we go do something else?"

Mao Mao felt the buzzing in his hands grow stronger as he imagined whatever leisure activity Badgerclops might suggest next. Maybe they'd play croquet, or paint still lifes, or some other skin-tearingly boring thing. He wasn't sure he could take that. He needed to *move*.

"Let's go rock climbing," Badgerclops said.

Mao Mao blinked. He'd been bracing for so much worse. "What?"

"Yeah, it'll be fun!" Badgerclops smiled at him. "Sounds like a great way to spend a day off."

"Yeah... yeah, I like the sound of that!" Mao Mao began to laugh. "Let's go climb a mountain!" He practically sprinted out of the building. Badgerclops grimaced to himself, following behind.

"This is great!" Mao Mao shouted as he dangled from a cliff face. He deftly swung his body up and pressed his foot up against a small crag. Pure Heart Valley spread out below him, forests giving way to plains and then a dense city, carved through with meandering roads and alleyways. By his estimation, they were about as high up as the palace was. An invigorating breeze brushed past his fur. He breathed deeply and laughed, the sound echoing slightly. "We should do this more often, Badgerclops!"

"Totally, man!" Badgerclops called back, straining to disguise any difficulty in his voice. He dug into the rock with his metal arm, panting and gasping. *This is the worst possible way to spend a day off.* He gritted his teeth and grabbed another handhold. *But it's for Mao.*

After what felt like ages, Badgerclops hauled himself up over the edge of the cliff and sprawled out on the ground. Mao Mao laid there next to him, having just pulled himself up a moment earlier. "Whew!" Mao Mao breathed, reveling in the post-workout glow. "That felt amazing, Badgerclops! What a great idea."

"Uh huh!" Badgerclops could tell his arm would need some serious work after this.

"So..." Mao Mao said after a moment, "What's next?"

"Let's see," Badgerclops said, sitting up and rubbing his chin as he thought. "Hiking? There's still plenty of mountain left."

Mao Mao sprung up from the ground, instantly invigorated. "Hah! Let's go!" He forged off into the woods ahead, leaving Badgerclops to follow.

Badgerclops groaned, lifting himself from the ground and trudging on. "Mao, hang on! There's a trail to follow! Don't just run off into the woods!"

"Who needs a trail?" Mao Mao scoffed, forcing the brush aside with glee. "We're heroes!"

Two exhausting hours later, they had almost reached their destination. Badgerclops was covered in bug bites. He could feel little stinging cuts all over his legs. Each plodding step felt like it might be his last. Mao Mao was whistling jauntily, apparently completely undisturbed. "Look, Badgerclops!" Mao Mao said, pointing ahead. "There it is!" He practically leapt the last few yards.

Badgerclops crashed out of the woods onto the edge of a rocky riverbed, just behind Mao Mao. A pristine river cut through the mountain forest, surprisingly deep and fast-flowing. He'd suggested they come here, and handled the navigation as they hiked over. As Mao Mao went over to the water, Badgerclops sat back hard on a relatively flat rock. *Just a little more,* he thought. He watched as Mao Mao splashed himself with cold mountain water, sitting down beside the river with a loud noise of satisfaction. He smiled. *Maybe this is worth it.* Then he tried to move one of his legs and found it totally leaden from their hike. He grimaced. *Well, almost worth it.*

"Badgerclops, come on!" Mao Mao called. "Let's go swimming!"

"I can do you one better, dude!" Badgerclops replied, standing with incredible difficulty. "Check this out." He joined Mao Mao by the river and popped open a compartment in his arm. A bright orange raft sprung out and began to inflate on the shore. Two collapsible oars sat in the middle of it.

Mao Mao looked at the raft with disbelief and glee. "Are we..?"

Badgerclops nodded and handed him one of the oars. "White water rafting!" By the time he'd drawn

his next breath, Mao Mao was already waist-deep in the water, holding the raft steady against the current. "Now *this* is a day off!" Mao Mao slapped the raft's inflated rim gleefully. "Hop in, Badgerclops!"

The rapids roared around them as they began to descend the mountain, the river twisting and carving through the earth. They crashed between rocks with the waves, Badgerclops paddling frantically trying to avoid any protrusions they couldn't slip over easily. It didn't take long for the violent spray to soak him to the bone. Mao Mao seemed to revel in it, throwing his head back and laughing as he steered their raft.

Their descent was mercifully quick, though the distant awareness of that fact didn't comfort Badgerclops much in the moment. Finally, in a particularly rough stretch of river, their boat flipped. Mao Mao leapt from the craft and landed gracefully on a rock, while Badgerclops slammed unceremoniously into a muddy drift. "Whoo!" Mao Mao shouted from his perch. "What a rush!" He waited for a reply from his boyfriend. "Badgerclops?"

Badgerclops wearily raised an arm from the mud in response.

A few minutes later they were home, Mao Mao talking non-stop the entire ride back. "...was absolutely incredible!" he finished as they finally stepped in the door. Mao Mao collapsed on the couch with a satisfied sigh. "Tonight's sleep will be *legendary*!" Mao Mao chuckled, kicking his feet slightly.

"Heh, yeah," Badgerclops said with a half-hearted chuckle. He tugged off his sopping wet bandolier and dropped it to the ground. "I'm... gonna go take a bath."

"What?" Mao Mao sat up, looking at Badgerclops over the back of the couch as he walked towards the bathroom. "But it's almost time for dinner!"

Badgerclops stopped and turned to him. "Look at me, dude." He was covered in mud, his fur matted and filthy. His metal claws were bent and ragged from clinging to the rocks on their climb. He shambled towards the bathroom, barely able to move his tired limbs.

Seeing his boyfriend's complete exhaustion, Mao Mao finally realized what had happened. "Badgerclops, wait!" he called, standing from the couch. "Did you do all of that... for me?"

Badgerclops looked away. "What? Haha, no way! I had a lot of fun too!" His smile was utterly unconvincing.

Mao Mao felt unbelievably guilty. Badgerclops must have seen how agitated he was and come up with a whole day off plan, just for him. And yet that whole time, he'd never even checked in to see how Badgerclops was doing. "Badgerclops, I... Thank you." He walked over and placed a hand on Badgerclops's back, guiding him to the bathroom and opening the door. "Let me help you with your arm."

In a few minutes Badgerclops was reclining comfortably in the tub, hot water pouring from the tap. His damaged metal arm rested by the door. Mao Mao sat on a stool next to the bath, listening to him complain.

"I didn't even think it was possible for one forest to have so many mosquitos!" Badgerclops moaned, laughing a little. Mao Mao laughed too, squirting shampoo in one of his bare paws and working it into Badgerclops's scalp.

"I can't believe you did all that just for me. I'm sorry I didn't pay more attention to how you were feeling."

Badgerclops smiled, a little rivulet of suds rolling down his face. "I love you, dude! It was just nice to see you having such a good time."

Mao Mao smiled too. "How about tomorrow we do what *you* want? We can just sit around all day. I promise I can handle it."

Badgerclops smirked. "That's good, because I don't think I can leave this tub."

They both laughed, the sound of it echoing off the tiled walls and mingling with the splashing of the water.

RoNikDraws

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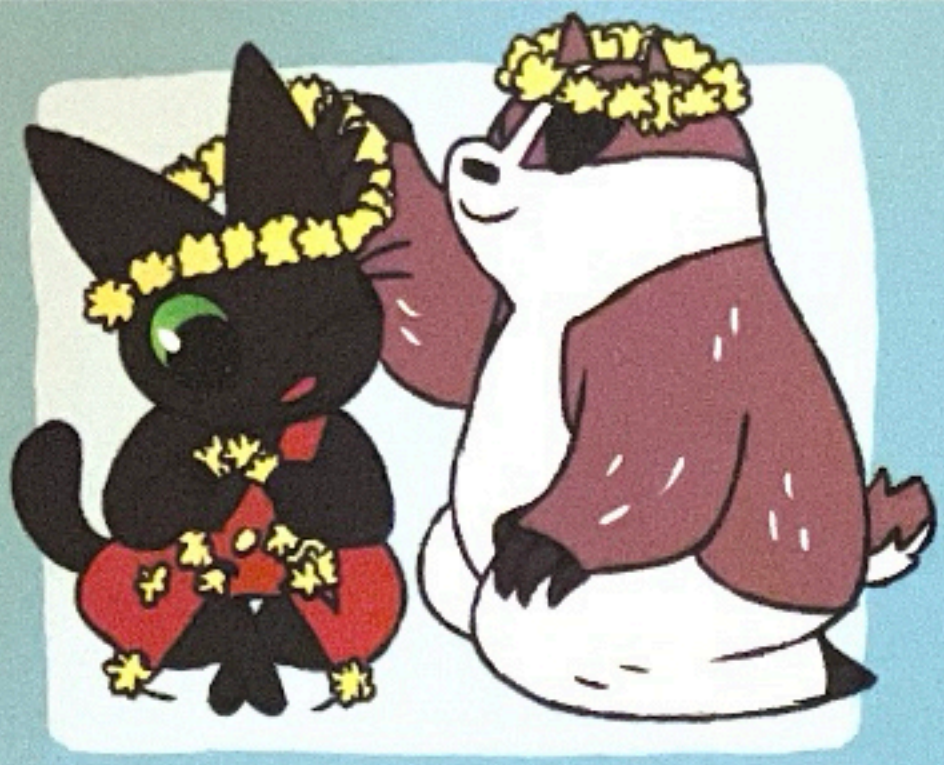

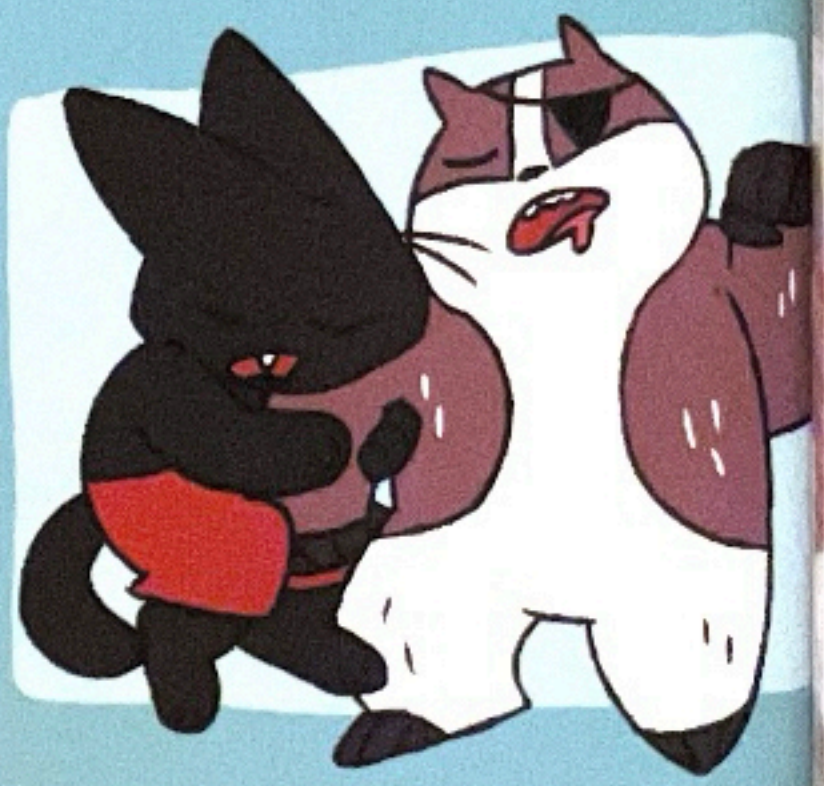

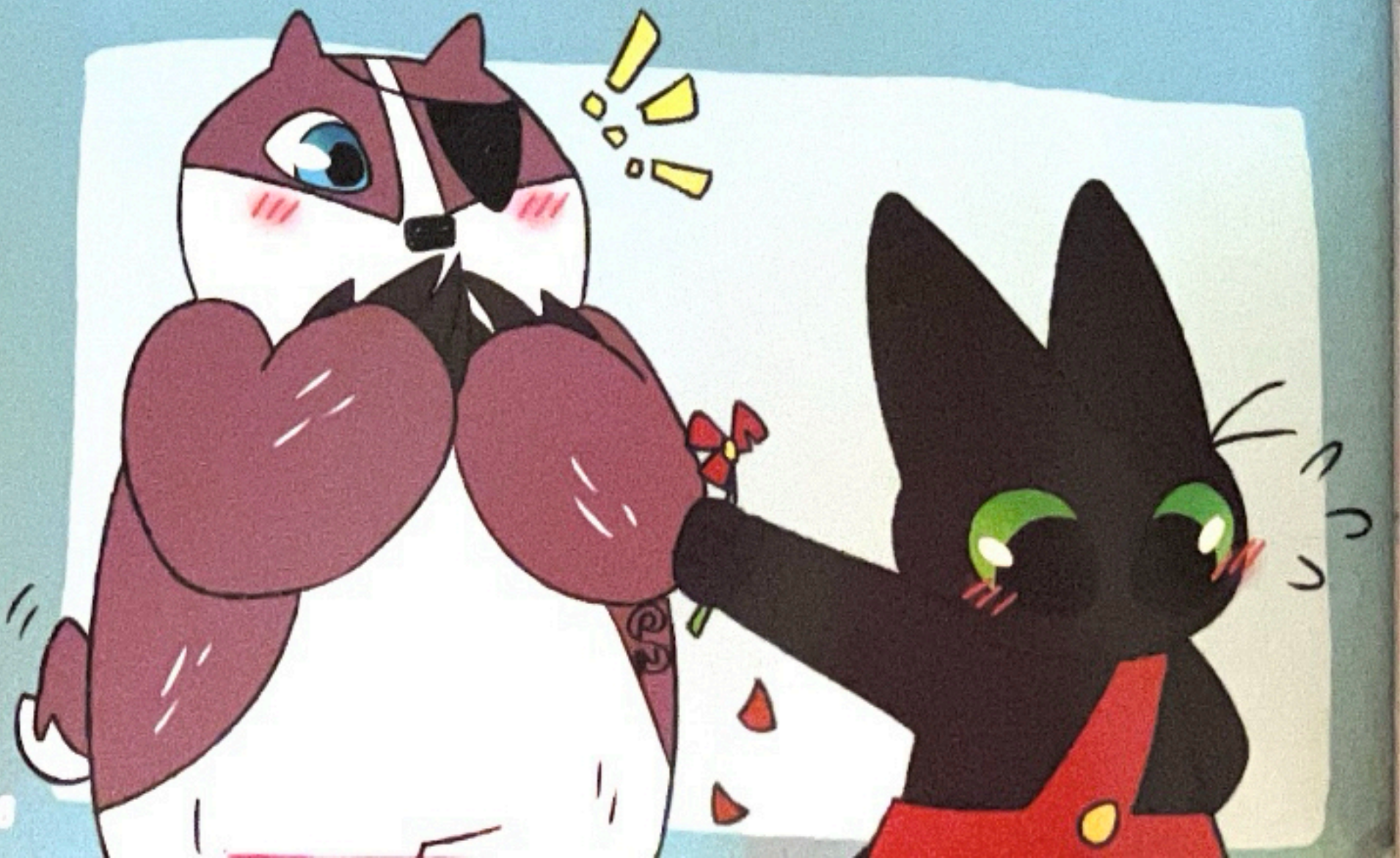

Memories of Our Time

Everything was quiet and calm as the sun slowly rose to wake the sleeping kingdom. A window opened showing a sweetypie yawning and smiling to the beautiful setting. The trees slowly swayed side to side with the light breeze. Everything was so nice, until a yell ruined everyone's morning.

"BADGERCLOPS! Move your lazy butt out here!" Mao Mao yelled as he began to drag the badger out to the dojo. "Stop it man," Badgerclops shouted back, "you know that I am allergic to working out and exercising!" Mao Mao ignored his cries as they finally reached the dojo. "See, it wasn't that hard, was it?" The proud black feline said as he turned toward the sun and puffed his chest out in a heroic pose. The dojo was quiet, with only the light breeze blowing past him like a hushed whisper. A small creaking noise from behind caught his attention. He quickly turned his head around and saw Badgerclops trying to crawl away. Mao Mao couldn't help but smile at how cute Badgerclops looked.

"What are you doing, you cute little badger?" Mao Mao thought.

Badgerclops continued crawling away until he noticed a shadow start to loom over his back. He stopped dead in his tracks, feeling a pair of eyes staring at him. He slowly turned around and saw Mao Mao's face, just inches away from his. "What are you doing?" Mao Mao said with a surprisingly pleasant smile. Badgerclops couldn't help but be distracted for a moment by the warmth radiating off of his partner. He could see the individual strands of black fur being brushed in the light breeze.

"I've... never seen him look so... content? Happy?"

Badgerclops blinked, his mouth hanging open.

"I wonder what it'd take to keep him like this."

"...Ok, let's train or whatever." Badgerclops responded as he got up and walked toward the center of the dojo. Mao Mao continued smiling as he saw Badgerclops take a seat. The inner peace the feline felt was parallelled by the picturesque morning around them. No monsters or sweetypies were causing trouble in the valley. The King wasn't calling them to ruin their morning. Even the Sky Pirates seemed to be pre-occupied.

As he was waiting for Mao Mao to say something, Badgerclops could feel the sunlight hitting his back. It wasn't burning him, but instead felt pretty warm. It made him remember something deep in his heart, but he can't figure out what it was.

"I'm... happy, I think?" Badgerclops rested a paw on his chest, *"I mean, yeah, but... happiness doesn't feel like this. Maybe it's something... deeper."*

"Hey, Mao Mao, do you remember the first time we trained together?" Badgerclops asked as he looked down at the wooden floor. Even as he asked, he had a feeling that Mao Mao might not remember that day, or even want to remember. After all, it was the day that they—
"Mhm."

Mao Mao's curt reply caught Badgerclops off-guard. "You...remember too?" Badgerclops asked. "Of course I remember that day. You were the only one I ever let touch Geraldine, and you let me use your roboarm too." Mao Mao answered, feeling a bit of redness begin to stir in his cheeks. Fortunately, it

wasn't noticeable to Badgerclops. "Why do you ask? You thought I'd forget or something?" Mao Mao asks, his eyes softening. Badgerclops noticed that the sheriff's voice sounded softer as well, as if he were sad, or even a bit hurt.. "No, No, I'm sorry for doubting that you'd remember. It's just that since it was such a normal and boring day..." Badgerclops trailed off before laughing and he putting his arm behind his head.

"I see... but why do you ask?" Mao Mao asked again as he placed a hand on his hip, staring at Badgerclops. "Well, I was wondering if you could teach me how to use your katana again… please?" Badgerclops asked putting on a pleading face and opening his eye. He knew it normally wouldn't help him if he hit Mao Mao with the puppy-dog eye, but it felt right. Mao Maoclosed his eyes and cocked his head a bit to the side.

"Hmm..."

All Badgerclops could hear was the beating of his own heart and the thoughtful humming of his partner..

"Ok, but just this once," Mao Mao said as he unsheathed his katana. "Thanks, man." Badgerclops said as he got up to see Geraldine again. The sun's rays hit the golden katana, causing the whole dojo to be covered with a golden light. "Wow, so beautiful," Badgerclops said in awe as he lightly touched it. Badgerclops noticed that Mao Mao hadn't shoved him away yet, so he felt invited to investigate further. Badgerclops looked as Mao Mao, and Mao Mao gave him a small nod. Badgerclops smiled and gave a nod of his own as he gently lifted the sword from Mao Mao's hands.

Geraldine's blade felt cold around his hands as he held it up. Mao Mao watched him for a bit before reaching to hold Badgerclops' hands. Badgerclops jumped a bit as he felt Mao Mao's hands around his.

"So warm… so soft…"

Badgerclops dropped the katana as he lurched forward, unable to take the warm feeling in his chest any longer. He stepped away from Mao Mao and fell to the floor. He didn't understand what was happening to him—Why he felt so warm around him. Even now, Badgerclops couldn't stop thinking about him. Even as his own chest burned, all he wanted, more than for the feeling to relax, was for Mao Mao to never stop smiling like he had been.

Mao Mao was momentarily shocked by the sudden event. "Badgerclops, are you ok?" Mao Mao asked, worry filling his voice as he cautiously approached Badgerclops. Badgerclops didn't answer his question, but instead looked away from him. "I... don't understand what is happening to me?" Badgerclops looked down as his hands. "Why do I feel so...warm around you?" Badgerclops said as he wrapped his arms around himself.

The momentary feeling of fear subsided as Mao Mao started to realize what was going on. His look softened once more as he met his innocent deputy's eye.

Mao Mao sat beside Badgerclops. He could feel the deputy's warmth, and he couldn't help but lean on his shoulder. Badgerclops sat still as he felt the lightest purr begin to reverberate through his body. "Do you remember the day you saved me from that monster?" Mao Mao asked as he began to nuzzle deeper into the badger's shoulder.

"How could I ever forget?" Badgerclops answered in a whisper. He lightly pat Mao Mao on the head,wrapping his other arm around his small, soft body. "I was so afraid..."

"*Please*," a distant echo from a grievously-injured Mao Mao stung the back of his mind. "*Save me…*"

Badgerclops shook the memory away, his eye stinging with tears.

He held Mao Mao in an even tighter embrace. "I don't want to lose you. You're too important to me, Mao Mao!" Mao Mao looked up and see Badgerclops trying to hold back his tears. "Do...do you really mean it?" He asked, trying his best to hold back his own tears. "I do. I mean it with all my heart, Mao Mao!" Badgerclops nodded, his grimace slowly changing to a warm smile. A smile that make Mao Mao's heart melt. "Badgerclops, I... I love you too! And I don't want to lose you either." Mao Mao blurted out as he finally let his heart open to the deputy. He trusted him more than anyone else, and knew that he'd never hurt him. He was someone he could trust with everything, even his life. Someone who he could always rely on.

"Thanks, Mao Mao," Badgerclops muttered, resting his head on the sheriff's forehead.

Mao Mao smiled and pulled Badgerclops closer into his embrace, burying his head in the deputy's chest.

"I love you, Badgerclops."

"I love you too, Mao Mao."

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CROKER

MAO! WHERE ARE YOU...?

...DUDE, HE'S SO CUTE WHEN HE SLEEPS

COME ON, LETS GO TO BED

BADGER, STAY WITH ME

I...

YOU KNOW I COULD NEVER SAY NO TO YOU

@Tinahush_

MODERATORS

Mao Mao's Mother

maomother
maomaosmother

Nix

applesaughce
corfnlakes

Hawks/Leo

kytters
kytters

aaron

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1shimaru

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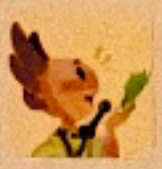

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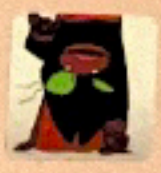

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MERCH ARTISTS

Ash

- Lameboobah
- Lameboobah

Aster (xlunardreamz)

- xlunardreamz
- xlunart

kane Tutssel

- Frog_spectacles
- frog_glasses_art

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